

Relational EXCHANGE

Sharing trauma
informed practice
ideas and strategies
for the ACT's
early childhood
educators

Building a team around the child

Welcome

Welcome to our next blog piece for 2021, relating to trauma-informed practice for the ACT's early childhood education and care (ECEC) community.

These pieces will provide links to practice and questions for discussion that you might find useful in your work – particularly when reflecting on supporting and educating children who have experienced trauma, and their families.

Why Relational Exchange?

We have called this blog 'Relational Exchange' for two reasons. Firstly, because this reflects the importance of connection through relationship that underpins both child development and repair or healing from the impacts of trauma. The nature or quality of the relational exchanges we engage with children and their families are critical. And every relational exchange provides an opportunity for understanding and an opportunity for repair.

Secondly, because this can provide an opportunity for an exchange of ideas amongst early childhood educators and other professionals. The topics explored here and the discussion questions presented will provide you with opportunities for reflection and exploration across your team, your site or centre, your networks and the broader communities of practice.

Why is building a team around each child important?

We know that, as much as we can learn about trauma and its impacts, each child we work with is truly unique and comes with their own strengths, challenges, stories, experiences and responses. But what we also know is that each child, particularly those who have experienced trauma, need a team of adults around them to support their healing and growth. The question is why is a team important and how do we ensure that team is an asset? This blog explores the reasons for building a team around each child from the perspective of how it helps the child but, perhaps more importantly, how it helps the adults in the child's world. It does that by linking this important component of trauma responsive practice to the principles of this approach because they intertwine in everything we do. The blog explores the importance of relationships, of consistency and repetition, of safety and then looks at how sharing the load is crucial for our own wellbeing.

Relationships are key

As continues to be discussed throughout all of the aspects of this program, relationships are fundamental to trauma responsive practice. We have talked previously about how relationship is often the site of complex developmental trauma which tells us that relationship is also the site of healing and repair for children who have had these experiences. However, what can get lost is that this work asks a lot of us as professionals and that relationship can be the site of the impact of the work on us. However, it should come as no surprise then that relationship is also the site of healing and repair for the adults in the child's world who might be adversely impacted by the relational interactions they have with traumatized children and often the traumatized families of which they are a part.

We need to build a team around the child of adults who understand the importance of relationships and who can use those relational exchanges to support each other through the work with a child who presents challenges to us. That team is focused on connections of meaning and safety and enable each professional in the team to feel supported and held when things can get overwhelming. Having a team of adults who all have an understanding of complex, developmental trauma is critical to their own, as well as the child's wellbeing.

Consistency and repetition are key

Throughout this program we also continually speak about how repetition builds brains. This is summarized by saying our brains are a representation of the things we have done the most. Building a team around the child enables a consistency of approach that supports the child to experience multiple repetitions of the same response and the same experiences that focus on repair, healing, growth and learning.

We want all the adults in the child's world to be 'on the same page' in terms of what they are working toward to best meet the needs of each child. This is not about being robotic or about

being completely the same but a consistency of response from multiple adults provide greater numbers of the same experience that can ameliorate the impacts of the traumatic experiences. An example of this is a consistent response to a particular behaviour. Most of us will think of challenging behaviours, but remember this can also be a response to a positive behaviour because children need consistent and repeated responses to things they do well as much as to those that are difficult. We often talk about building a 'script' for responding to a behaviour that is shared across the adults in the team around the child. This might include simple things like gestures to avoid and gestures to use, words to avoid and words to use, names to avoid using with the child and those that you can use.

What does this look like? Let's take Jeremy as an example. We might have a plan that says that when Jeremy is starting to escalate (and we know that he is because his speech will become much quicker and harder to understand, which is included in the plan ie: warning signs) we know that we should avoid moving toward Jeremy but move to be alongside him, we know that we should not touch him in that moment, we know that we should call him 'mate' because he really loves being called mate and we should speak quietly to him about needing to 'stand' because he loves his footy and that instruction comes from the umpires when a player needs to stand still on the mark. We want all the adults in the team around Jeremy to use this 'script' because we know that if you try to pat him on the arm when he is in this state he is likely to explode, if you walk straight toward him he is likely to run away and if you raise your voice to him and use his name in that moment he has been known to hit other children around him.

The more a pattern is repeated, the more the child learns that they can trust the adults in their world because they are consistent and safe and the child doesn't have to carry to ongoing worry of what changes might occur in their world. We have discussed before that one of the counterintuitive messages of trauma responsive practice is that more consistency builds a greater capacity to manage change.

Safety is key

As with the previous principles discussed, safety is fundamental to trauma responsive practice. The experience of safety, not just the physical presence of a lack of threat, is critical to enabling all of us to operate at our optimal level. That is our optimal level of physiology, relational capacity, learning and responding. This is the same for us as it is for the children. As we often equate it, you can't yell at someone to calm down. Equally, you can't support a child to experience safety if you don't feel safe yourself. Working with a team based approach supports all of us to feel safe as professionals and provide optimum care and opportunities to the children with whom we work.

We have already explored self-care and its importance in the context of this project but this piece tells us that we need to think about, and enact, the notion of 'team care' as well. Building a team around the child includes that team looking after each other within the team to provide a supported response. We cannot do relationally focused work alone and so how the team takes care of itself is critical. It is often the case that those who are significantly impacted by the work,

such as those who experience vicarious trauma, won't realise it for themselves because their cortical (or cognitive) capacity is also impacted. Those professionals need the team around them to notice their struggle, support them and work to 'share the load'.

Sharing the load is key

And thus, the final point is about sharing the load across the team around each child. The first way to share the load is to acknowledge that sharing is necessary. It is important that children who have experienced trauma do not become the responsibility of one staff member. We do sometimes see that the 'challenging children' end up being the responsibility of one person because 'you are good with them' or 'you have the patience I don't have' or 'you can cope with their behaviour better than we can'. This needs to move to a shared responsibility so no one person is overwhelmed with responding to the needs of children who have experienced trauma alone.

Underpinning this process is being clear in identifying the roles and responsibilities of the members of the team around each child. The team may just include staff from within your centre or site. However, it may also include family members alongside professionals from other services and professions and it is helpful to map who is responsible for what – as well as the limits of each person's role. We need to hold the boundaries of our own role as educators while still responding to each child as a unique individual. Having a record of those roles and responsibilities is helpful if and when any challenges or conflicts arise.

The process of collaborative practice reinforces the team around the child. Elements of collaborative practice include:

- Responsibility – ensuring everyone is clear about the parameters of their role
- Accountability – building the capacity within the team to hold a shared accountability for outcomes and positive experiences for the team and the child that the team supports
- Coordination – outlining a clear delineation of who does what within the team including who holds lead responsibility
- Communication – ensuring a clarity of communication across and within the team
- Cooperation – building a clear purpose for everyone to ascribe to and work towards
- Assertiveness – enabling everyone to have a clear and equal voice
- Autonomy – confirming each person's role within the team while still holding a shared purpose

- Mutual trust and respect – ensuring this fundamentally important relational principle underpins the work of the team.

Building the team around the child is an experience of a parallel process which reminds us that to be able to focus on the child and their wellbeing we need to focus on ourselves and our wellbeing. It also reminds us that the principles of trauma responsive practice apply to us all as much as they do to the children we care for and support.

Where to from here?

In reviewing the information in this blog article you might like to reflect on – or discuss with your colleagues – your responses to the following questions:

- How strong is the team approach to trauma responsive practice already in place in my centre or site? How could we make it even better?
- What do you and your team around the child need to do to be able to build a 'script' for responding to children's behaviour? What do we need to know, find out or learn?
- Do we have clearly defined roles and responsibilities across the centre or site? Does that extend to other services with whom we connect to support our children? What is one thing we could do to improve that understanding, if required?
- What can we do as a staff team to look after ourselves in our work?
- How else does this information link to the children with whom we work?